

RECONCILIATION, FORGIVENESS AND VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

BIBLICAL, PASTORAL AND ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITORS

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TOWARDS AN (IM)POSSIBLE POLITICS OF FORGIVENESS?

Considering the Complexities of Religion, Race and Politics
in South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter engages the complexity of a politics of forgiveness in South Africa some 24 years after the end of political apartheid. We shall do so by considering contested understandings of forgiveness among Black and White South Africans in relation to the trauma and history of apartheid. Why do White South Africans want forgiveness? Is it to find freedom from the wwguilt of apartheid, or possibly also to be set free from the responsibility to make reparations for the past? Could forgiveness be a weapon that further wounds Black South Africans by expecting them not only to live with the social, political and economic consequences of apartheid, but also to stop calling for justice? In his poem, 'Fiction en estrangement,' Nathan Trantraal speaks of how the Christian religion calls Black South Africans to forgive their White perpetrators. Yet this call doesn't always count the cost of the call for forgiveness. He speaks of "die gif in vergifnis", the poison (gif) in forgiveness (vergifnis) (Trantraal, 2017).

This chapter draws upon a four-year qualitative empirical study on how Black and White South African Christians understand the processes and notions of forgiveness in the light of South Africa's complex economic, social and political context. The project is entitled 'The (im)possibility of forgiveness?'

We begin by considering the notion of the (im)possibility of forgiveness in present day South Africa. Why does the research focus on forgiveness (and not mercy, reconciliation, or indeed retribution or redistribution)? Next, we shall spend some time looking at the relationship between social identity complexities and notions of forgiveness among Black and White South African Christians. We shall end with some considerations of what may contribute towards making (im)possible forgiveness possible, and meaningful, among South Africans.

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WHY (IM)POSSIBLE FORGIVENESS?

Forgiveness, as a theological and social discourse in South Africa, is deeply contested. Numerous South African scholars and activists have raised concerns about the transactional nature of the concept of forgiveness (cf. Gobodo-Madikizela & Van der Merwe (eds.), 2009; Vosloo, 2015; 2012). As has already been noted, there are concerns about the expectation that the concept places on persons who have been wronged. Is it morally acceptable to expect a person, or community, that has undergone harm to choose to forgive the perpetrator? If there are certain instances in which this may be acceptable, or desirable, to do so, what are the expectations for the perpetrators of harm?

In surveying a range of views on this subject one soon comes to the realisation that forgiving another for wrongdoing is a complex and difficult process. Theological understandings of forgiveness vary a great deal among Christians. This is particularly so when persons hold different understandings of the concept based on their social identity and current contextual reality. It will be shown that social identity shaped by notions such as race, culture, economic reality, theological beliefs, and current experience, play a significant role in understandings of forgiveness.

Moreover, interpersonal socio-political factors such as the nature of the historical offence, whether reparation has been made (or attempted), the political identities of the parties involved, expectations and conditions for the self and for the other, also play a role in understandings of forgiveness.

At this point it is necessary to make a brief discursus on an aspect of terminology. In my writing, and whenever I speak, I encourage colleagues not to use the phrase “post-apartheid South Africa” (cf. Botha & Forster 2017:2, Footnote 7). Although political apartheid ended in South Africa with the first democratic elections in 1994, the reality is that in the daily experience of most South Africans, apartheid remains very real and present. As we shall see, economic segregation, racial and spatial geographic segregation, racism, and the politics of identity are worse today than they were in 1994 (cf. Hofmeyr & Govender, 2015:1). Recent work that I have been doing with young Black activists (many of whom were born into freedom after 1994) has led me to the conviction that the use of the term “post-apartheid South Africa” is disingenuous. It compounds the suffering of the poor and disenfranchised by using language that suggests that their daily experience of the slow violence of poverty, inequality, and identity politics is not valid or real. Hence, we shall not use that term in this chapter.

Returning to the importance of studies on forgiveness, some persons have suggested that forgiveness is a necessary condition for moving forward to a better future for all South Africans (Mandela, 1995:617; 2012:44; Thesnaar, 2008:53–73; 2014:1–8; Tutu, 2012:47–48, 74, 218). Yet, some of the entrenched theological, social, racial, economic and political challenges that South Africa faces seem to suggest that forgiveness is almost impossible at present. The 2015 Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) report found the following:

While most South Africans agree that the creation of a united, reconciled nation remains a worthy objective to pursue, the country remains afflicted by its historical divisions. The majority feels that race relations have either stayed the same or deteriorated since the country's political transition in 1994 and the bulk of respondents have noted income inequality as a major source of social division. Most believe that it is impossible to achieve reconciled society for as long as those who were disadvantaged under apartheid remain poor within the 'new South Africa' (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2015:1).

Recent events in South Africa, such as the #FeesMustFall protests against economic inequalities and economic injustice in higher education (Baloyi & Isaacs, 2015), the spate of racial slurs and denials of Black pain on social media, for example, Penny Sparrow and Hellen Zille (Herman, 2017; Makhulu, 2016:260; Nhemachena, 2016:411–416; Surmon, Juan & Reddy, 2016:1–2), and the re-racialisation of society through identity politics (Mbembe, 2015), seem to support the validity of the IJR's findings.

South Africa faces significant challenges with regards to dealing with the 'sins' of its past and the complexity of our present life. How do persons understand forgiveness in such a context? What may authentic, and acceptable, forgiveness mean for Black or White South Africans? Is forgiveness in South Africa (im)possible?

The use of the phrase "(im)possible" is deliberate. The notion is predicated on Jacques Derrida's use of im-possible in his lecture, *A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event* (Derrida, 2007:441–461), and also Richard Kearney's discussion of this concept in relation to forgiveness in, *Forgiveness as the limit: Impossible or possible* (Kearney, 2013:305–320). The concept is discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Forster, 2017a:16, b:1–3, 8–9; Ricoeur & Brennan, 1995:7; Vosloo, 2015:360–378). What is of importance in the usage of the term in this chapter is the tension that the phrase creates between what is impossible, and so possible (i.e. the bracketing of the what makes the (im)possible, possible) (Vosloo, 2015:365–368). As it will be shown, the impossibility of forgiveness (the fact that true forgiveness is not possible in an economic or practical sense in South Africa), is what makes true forgiveness, as an act of impossible grace both necessary and possible.

How could one ever attach a price to compensate for the violence of apartheid? What possible act, or gesture, could truly account for the dehumanising experiences and consequences of this social and political system? Of course, this does not mean that such acts are unimportant; indeed, they are essential and have to be undertaken! However, it does question the contingent relationship that some political actors place on mere political, economic, or social recompense. For example, when Black South Africans 'own' the land and the economy of South Africa, would this have dealt with all of the horror and brokenness of apartheid? Would it have sufficiently re-humanised both victim and perpetrator for mutually interdependent flourishing? No, this is a necessary beginning, but the intended aim of forgiveness requires these transactions and more (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2013:119–120, 172). Narrow transactional views of forgiveness, as shall be shown, are not only theoretically

inadequate; they also do not meet the expectations and understandings of what is required among Black and White South African Christians.

In this sense, we can claim that forgiveness is both theological and political in nature – it is a politics of forgiveness. So, let's move on to consider how Black and White South African Christians conceptualise the politics of forgiveness.

A POLITICS OF FORGIVENESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

As was mentioned in the introduction, this chapter draws on the process and findings of a recently completed four year long project in empirical intercultural biblical ethics (cf. Forster, 2017a). That project was predicated upon the notion that complexifying and texturing understandings of how individuals and groups from two racially and culturally diverse Christian communities in South Africa understand forgiveness in their interpretation of Matthew 18.15-35. Stated differently, the project considered social identity complexity at the intersection of political and theological identity in relation to the hermeneutics of forgiveness among contemporary readers of the biblical text.²

Before we discuss the findings of the project it is worth clarifying why forgiveness was chosen. Why not mercy, or retribution, or redistribution, or compensation, or reconciliation? Why such a deeply religious and theologically textured, even contested, concept such as forgiveness?

The politics of forgiveness and the South African religious social imaginary

In part, the answer to the previous question can be related to earlier discussions on the recognised inadequacies of mere transactional engagements between those who have been harmed, and those who harm them. Political and economic transactions, while necessary, are inadequate to re-humanise both parties for mutual flourishing and shared humanity (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2013:119–120, 172). However, there are some further reasons for the choice of forgiveness as a concept. South Africa remains a deeply religious nation. Religion plays a very significant role in the formation of South African values and political identities.

- 2 In the research project, Black and White Christians read Matthew 18.15–35. They first read it in their homogenous 'in-group' setting (i.e. a predominantly Black group reading on their own, and a White group reading on their own). This allowed the participants in each group to express their understandings, beliefs and convictions in a safe cultural and social setting. Next, the two communities were brought together. In these intercultural sessions they read the text together as a mixed group of Black and White readers. This intercultural dynamic changed their engagement with the text, and with one another, in significant ways. Finally, the two groups met separately on another occasion. In these last meetings they once again read the text in their homogenous 'in-group' cultural and racial setting. The intention was to see how much the members adapted their understandings of forgiveness between the first and last sessions. In particular, the research wanted to see if reading the text in a setting of positive intergroup contact (an intercultural Bible study) changed their understandings of forgiveness.

The most recent survey of the South African population conducted by Statistics South Africa was done in 2013. This survey shows that 84.2% of South Africa's citizens self-identified as Christians (*General Household Survey 2013, 2014; Schoeman, 2017:3*).

Table 3 General Household Survey 2013 religious affiliation

Religion	N	%
Christian	44 602 155	84.2
Muslim	1 042 043	2.0
Ancestral, tribal, animist, or other traditional African religions	2 626 015	5.0
Hindu	529 471	1.0
Buddhist and Bahai	16 992	0.0
Jewish	101 544	0.2
Atheist and agnostic	112 972	0.2
Something else	48 084	0.1
Nothing in particular	2 916 049	5.5
Refused and do not know	154 569	0.3
Unspecified	832 097	1.6
Total	52 981 990	100.00

Source: Statistics South Africa 2014

This is an increase of 4.4% from 79.8% in 2001 (Hendriks & Erasmus, 2005; Schoeman, 2017:3). The largest percentage of Christians belong to a diverse conglomeration of churches and Christian groupings which are collectively categorised as "African independent" (40.82%) and "Other Christian" (11.96%). The Methodist Church of Southern African is the largest mainline Christian denomination (9.24%) followed by a collective grouping of Reformed Christian churches (Uniting Reformed Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Presbyterian Church, etc.), at 9.04%.

Table 2 Census 2001

Denomination	Total	%	
		Christian	Total
Reformed	3 232 194	9.04	7.21
Anglican	1 722 076	4.82	3.84
Methodist	3 305 404	9.24	7.37
Lutheran	1 130 986	3.16	2.52
Presbyterian, Baptist	1 687 668	4.72	3.77
Roman Catholic	3 181 336	8.90	7.10
Pentecostal, Charismatic	2 625 830	7.34	5.86
Africa Independent	14 598 922	40.82	32.57
Other Christian	4 275 942	11.96	9.54
Total Christian	35 760 358	100.00	79.79
Jew	75 555	-	0.17
Hindu	551 669	-	1.23
Muslim	654 064	-	1.46
Eastern faith	7 395	-	0.02
Other faith	417 864	-	0.93
Total other religions	1 706 547	-	3.81
No religion, refused or not specified	7 352 875	-	16.41
Total South African population	44 819 780	-	100.00

Source: Hendriks 2005:30-31

So, in a nominal sense at least, South Africans have a self-identified religious identity. However, what role does religion play in their public (political) lives? A 2010 Pew-report found that 74% of South Africans “indicated that religion plays an important role in their lives” (Lugo & Cooperman, 2010:3; Schoeman, 2017:3–4).

The Global Values Survey (GVS) helps us to gain a qualitative insight into the “important role” of religion in the lives of South Africans. The survey shows that religious organisations remain among the most trusted institutions in society, enjoying higher levels of public trust and confidence than either the state or the private sector (Winter & Burchert, 2015:1). The report notes that “while trust in political institutions recedes. In contrast, civil society organisations [including religious organisations]³ enjoy growing trust” (Winter & Burchert, 2015:1). Hennie Kotzé, the lead researcher on the GVS for South Africa, explains this sentiment when he comments that, “Religion in general, and churches in particular, plays an important political socialisation role [for South Africans]” (Kotzé, 2016:439–440; Kotzé & Garcia-Rivero, 2017:33).

From this overview of the statistics in the recent General Household Survey (2013) and the Global Values Survey on South Africa (2013), at least two things can be concluded:

- First, that South Africa remains a deeply religious nation with almost 85% of the population self-identifying as members of the Christian faith.⁴
- Second, that South Africans place a great deal of trust and confidence in their religious convictions, religious leaders, and faith communities, as these remain among the most trusted personal and social institutions in South African at present (Kotzé, 2016:439–440; Kotzé & Garcia-Rivero, 2017:33). This is particularly so for the Christian population, Christian leaders, and Christian Churches and Faith Based Organisations.

The Church is clearly a significant social institution that garners a great deal of respect and trust among South African citizens. Moreover, religion plays an important role in shaping social and political ideals.

As mentioned earlier, some persons have argued that forgiveness is too contested and contingent a concept (or process) to allow for constructive social engagement toward change in South Africa (cf. Gobodo-Madikizela & Van der Merwe, 2009; Lephakga, 2016; Vosloo, 2015; 2012). For example, John Brewer⁵ has advocated for the use of “mercy” instead of forgiveness (Brewer & Hayes, 2016). His contention is that discourses of forgiveness are too contingent on the actions of the offending party, and the expectation of grace on the part of offended party is frequently unreasonable. Brewer suggests that mercy only requires a decision, or act of will, on the part of the offended party (i.e. the person who has been injured). This may

3 In this report, the Church is classified within the ‘civil society’ grouping.

4 The General Household survey has further interesting information on attendance at religious ceremonies, the age, race and gender breakdown of South Africa’s religious population, and the decline and growth of different religions and Christian denominations (cf. *General Household Survey 2013, 2014*; Schoeman, 2017:1–7).

5 John Brewer is Professor of Post Conflict Studies at Queens University, Belfast.

indeed, be true, and Brewer's results for Ireland tend to support his findings for that context. However, in South Africa the language of forgiveness, and the associated discourses seem to be more widely accepted for two reasons.

First, after the transfer to democratic rule in South Africa, Nelson Mandela initiated a process of 'healing' and 'forgiveness' that merged the political and religious – the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Mr Mandela appointed Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a trusted religious leader who garnered political respect and general social acceptance at the time, to head this process. The TRC sought to create a space, and opportunity, for South Africans to tell of the atrocities of apartheid, in a safe environment where victims of apartheid (or their relatives) could engage with the perpetrators of abuse (Cochrane, De Gruchy & Martin, 1999; Gobodo-Madikizela, 1998; Meiring, 2014; Villa-Vicencio & du Toit, 2006). The intention was to facilitate a measure of truth telling, where forgiveness, and the possibility of reconciliation, could be facilitated.⁶ The TRC strengthened the social currency and social imaginary⁷ of political forgiveness in South African society for some years. Although, it must be noted that the TRC is being reconsidered and challenged in recent years (cf. Bundy, 2000:9–20; Landman, 2001; Lephakga, 2016; Statman, 2000; Van der Merwe & Chapman, 2008).

Second, the South African political, social and economic history has contributed to an untenable social reality that would seem to necessitate tangible acts of change, restitution, and remorse, on the part of the offending parties (i.e. White South Africans) (Bowers du Toit & Nkomo, 2014; Lephakga, 2016). The expectation for compensation and redistribution is a significant aspect of the discourse of transformation and reconciliation in South Africa; this might be different from what is expected in Ireland. For example, in my work with 'born free' activists, there is very little patience with discourses of forgiveness or reconciliation that do not require the perpetrators of economic violence, spatial politics, and privilege, to make tangible and significant contributions to transformation. These young activists want land and access to the formal economy, not just social harmony, national cohesion and a lack of racial enmity (Forster, 2016). What they are calling for is an ethics of responsibility more than a theology of mercy.

Hence, as we shall see in the empirical findings in the next section, Black South Africans tend to favour the language of tangible forgiveness over mercy since it has religious and social familiarity. In addition, it has the requirement and expectation of compensatory action on the part of the beneficiaries and perpetrators of apartheid.

6 For a powerful narrative of the establishment, work, and outcomes of the TRC please see, *Chronicle of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: A Journey through the Past and Present into the Future of South Africa* (Meiring, 2014:90). For a critical appraisal of the work of the TRC please see, Villa-Vicencio, C. and du Toit, F. (2006). *Truth & Reconciliation in South Africa: 10 Years on*. Cape Town: New Africa Books, and Lephakga, T. (2016:1–10). Radical reconciliation: The TRC should have allowed Zacchaeus to testify? *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 72(1).

7 For a discussion of the notion of the "social imaginary" please see, Taylor, C. (2004), *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp.22–30.

The politics of forgiveness and social identity in South Africa

Black and White South African Christians hold very different views on the concepts and processes of forgiveness as the findings in this research project (cf. Forster (2017a), Sections 6.11.1–6.11.3) and the literature show.⁸ Vosloo notes that the unfinished business of forgiveness in South Africa reiterates that “forgiveness and related concepts regarding engagement with the past continue to be influential, albeit also highly contested, in public discourse” (Vosloo, 2015:363). This is particularly true for the public life and witness of Christian communities and Christian individuals in South Africa.

One significant problem that has been identified, and is evidenced in the findings of the aforementioned IJR research, is that these un-reconciled persons seldom have contact with each other because of the legacy of the apartheid system which separates persons racially, according to economic class, and geographically (Hofmeyr & Govender, 2015:1). The result is that, as inter-group contact theory⁹ suggests, each group’s own social views and religious beliefs (in-group identity) become entrenched, and the views and beliefs of the ‘other’ (out-group identity) are rejected or ignored because they are not understood or engaged across the socially separating boundaries of South African society (Bornman, 2011:411–414; Brewer & Kramer, 1985:219–223; Duncan, 2003:2, 5).

In at least one sense, this makes forgiveness nearly impossible – not only is it impossible for persons to forgive one another since they have no proximate or authentic social engagement with one another; forgiveness is also a theological impossibility because of deeply held and entrenched faith convictions about the nature and processes of forgiveness. In other words there is no willingness to ‘translate’ in-group understandings in relation to out-group understandings of the processes and requirements for authentic forgiveness to take place (Kearney, 2007:151–152). Thus, there is both a hermeneutic and a social barrier to forgiveness. Paul Ricoeur suggests that what is needed is an act of translation¹⁰ that can bridge the differences in language (linguistic translation) and the very nature of the difference of experience between the self and the other (ontological translation) (Ricoeur & Brennan, 1995:7).¹¹ Kearney comments on the necessity for such acts of translation and forgiveness that it,

8 See, Byrne (2007); Chapman and Spong (2003:169); Daye (2012:8–18); Elkington (2011:5–35, 135–155); Gobodo-Madikizela and Van der Merwe (2009:vii–xi); Krog (2010); Thesnaar (2008; 2013:1–15); Tutu (2012:10–36, 47–60, 92–124); Villa-Vicencio and du Toit (2006:75–87); Vosloo (2015:360–378; 2012).

9 Inter-group contact theory is a well-developed and credible academic field. It is one of the two primary theories used in this research. Please see Forster (2017a:57–80) for a detailed discussion.

10 “Translation can be understood here in both a specific and a general sense. In the specific sense – the one in common contemporary usage – it signals the work of translating the meanings of one particular language into another. In the more generic sense, it indicates the everyday act of speaking as a way not only of translating oneself (inner to outer, private to public, unconscious to conscious, etc.) but also more explicitly of translating oneself to others” (Ricoeur, 2007:xiv–xv).

11 “The identity of a group, culture, people or nation, is not that of an immutable substance, nor that of a fixed structure, rather, of a recounted story” (Ricoeur & Brennan, 1995:7).

... is only when we translate our own wounds in the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place (in Ricoeur, 2007:xx).

De Gruchy says that in this sense the process of forgiveness, and even reconciliation, “is a work in progress, a dynamic set of processes into which we are drawn and in which we participate” (De Gruchy, 2002:28). The notion of participation in the process of forgiveness is important. It shows just how much we need one another – the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ – to discover what may make forgiveness possible. He goes on to say that forgiveness, in this shared relational sense, is more than a mere event or a goal for which we aim. Rather, it is a varied and multifaceted discovery that grows out of our togetherness. In the processes of encounter the opportunity for translation and discovery of new meaning among the participants becomes possible. The shared journey may even lead to the creation of new understandings of forgiveness that unsettle, or transcend, the previously held notions of the participants as they discover a new and possible future.

As mentioned earlier, the empirical intercultural Bible research project, which generated the qualitative data for this study, focussed on the hermeneutic perspectives of forgiveness among the Black and White Bible readers of Matthew 18:15-35.¹² An integral All Quadrant All Level (AQAL) social identity model was employed to gather rich and textured data on the participants’ social identities and theological views in relation to concepts and processes of forgiveness (c.f. Forster, 2017a, chap. 2).

According to AQAL integral theory there are four irreducible perspectives that must be taken into account when attempting to understand an aspect of reality. They are, the subjective (I), the intersubjective (we), the objective (it) and the interobjective (its) (see Figure 1 below). In its most basic form, the integral theory expresses that everything can be considered from two basic distinctions: 1) An inner and an outer perspective, and also from 2) An individual and a collective perspective.

12 This chapter will not present the biblical exegetical element of the study since it is an extensive and complex body of work that is not central to the current argument. You can read it in chapter 4 of the book and in the following article (Forster, 2017b).

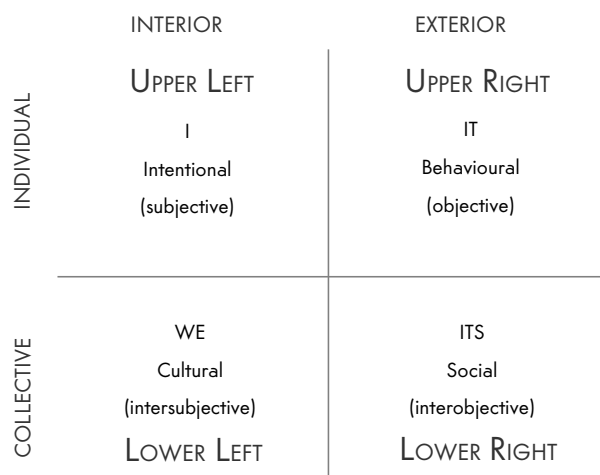


Figure 1 Four aspects of social and individual identity and meaning

This approach provided both language and a thought construct around which to develop a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted complexity of social identity and hermeneutics.

What we found in our study with these groups of Black and White Christians, was the following:

- In Group A, which is a predominantly Black / Coloured community, forgiveness was largely understood in a collective and social manner (cf. Forster (2017a), Sections 6.2.1-6.2.5). In other words, forgiveness was not only an individual concern; it had social consequences and social expectations within the community. Moreover, this group understood that forgiveness was not only a matter of spiritual restoration between the individual (or community) and God. Rather, it should be evidenced in the restoration of relationships and structures in the community. For this group, forgiveness can only be authentic if the conditions for forgiveness are evidenced in the community – in other words, forgiveness in South Africa would be contingent upon economic transformation, transfer of land ownership, a transformation of social power dynamics, and visible and tangible expressions of remorse on the part of the beneficiaries and initiators of apartheid in South Africa. A social understanding of community harmony is largely in keeping with notions of intersubjective identity that are more common in Black and Coloured South African communities (Adhikari, 2005; Cakal, Hewstone, Schwär & Heath, 2011; Forster, 2010a, b; cf. Shutte, 2009).
- An analysis of the results showed that Group B, which is an entirely White community, largely understood forgiveness in an individual and spiritual manner (cf. Forster (2017a), Sections 6.2.6-6.2.9). For the majority of participants in this group, the pre-intercultural engagement data showed that they viewed forgiveness as being primarily a matter of restoring their spiritual relationship with God. They did not initially consider that forgiveness may need to engage the party against whom the sin (or grievance) was committed. Forgiveness would have been enacted when God had set them free from the guilt and spiritual culpability of their actions. Such a view of forgiveness would not necessarily entail the restoration of relational harmony among members of the community or the restitution of social, political or economic structures in the community. Common expressions of this view would be

statements such as, "Apartheid was wrong, but it is over. I confessed my part in it and I believe God has forgiven me. Now we need to move on and stop living in the past. We must stop talking about apartheid".

It is not too difficult to see how persons who hold these different views of the politics of forgiveness may struggle to understand one another, and may even face conflict with one another as a result.

TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS OF FORGIVENESS?

The research reported on in this study was structured as a practice oriented research project (Forster, 2017a, chap. 5). In other words, it was initiated at the request of a problem owner (i.e. the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Helderberg Circuit), and sought to address a problem in practice (i.e. that a Black and White Christian community were living with historical trauma and hurt as a result of racial strife expressed in spatial, economic, and social separation). The problem owner wanted to understand how the Black and White members of the community conceptualised notions and processes of forgiveness, but more importantly, might there be certain conditions under which they would be willing to engage one another towards the development of some shared understanding of forgiveness?

As was shown in the previous section, members of the respective communities (Group A and Group B) approached the biblical text from a hermeneutic perspective that was consistent with their primary social identity. Thus, it can be said that the participants displayed culturally and socially informed biblical hermeneutics. This being the case, the study postulated that when the participants engaged in biblical interpretation in an intercultural biblical setting that they will undergo some hermeneutical shifts in their understandings of forgiveness, and their perceptions of one another. The new intercultural setting would lead to a broader intercultural biblical hermeneutical perspective that would alter their theological understandings of forgiveness.

However, a positive intercultural shift can only take place if the intercultural group contact is facilitated as a form of "positive inter-group contact" (Forster, 2017a:9, 61–63). Mere contact between the participants from two different homogenous cultural, or race, groups is not sufficient to facilitate a positive integral shift in hermeneutic and theological-ethical understandings of forgiveness. Negative inter-group contact could lead to an increase in anxiety between the in-group and out-group participants (from both group perspectives). Rather than allowing for a positive, more integrated and culturally diverse biblical hermeneutics, it could lead to a closed, more entrenched, or more strongly held in-group perspective on the interpretation of forgiveness in the text (Forster, 2017a:137–139).

Thus, the study hypothesised that if the intercultural biblical reading process takes place under conditions in which the mechanisms for positive inter-group contact are introduced with care, the participants will experience a decrease in anxiety and an increase in affective empathy and cognitive empathy (Bornman, 1999:412; Forster, 2017a:139; Pettigrew, 1998:67–69; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005:951–957).

These psychosocial states could facilitate the conditions under which participants are willing re-evaluate their own hermeneutic perspectives of forgiveness in the light of the perspectives of members from the other group, i.e. in relation to out-group perspectives.

To illustrate this, I would like to share just one story of an encounter between two participants in the study. The event that took place between two members of the groups exemplifies the complexity of forgiveness in the network of memory, emotion, politics, economics, race and class. Two male members of the groups, one Black the other White, were engaged in a heated discussion on economic inequality, White privilege, and the need for restorative justice and reparation as a pre-condition for forgiveness in South Africa. The White participant conceded that apartheid was wrong. He went so far as to say that he felt remorse and guilt over the past. Yet, he was quick to add that he could not agree with the Black participant that he was privileged, and that he should pay reparations (economic recompense, giving up land ownership, etc.) in order to make forgiveness a reality between them. He simply could not understand why the Black participant was framing his understanding of forgiveness in political and economic terms, when his primary focus for forgiveness was his faith, i.e. forgives as grace, mercy and hope. He said something like, "I have confessed my part in apartheid. It was wrong. I asked God to forgive me. I am not willing to live in the sin of the past. This is a new day. We need to move on. Anyway, I work hard and I was never given anything for free. Everything I have has been earned." The Black participant stopped the conversation and asked the White participant a question: "Do you have children?" To which the White participant replied, "Yes, I do." Then, he said, "When you dream about your children's future, what do you dream for them?" He replied, "I dream that they are safe, and happy, that their lives are full, that they don't have to suffer and can thrive". To which the Black participant replied, "Well guess what, I have the same dream". This encounter (affective empathy accompanied by cognitive empathy) (Forster, 2017a:199–201) allowed the two participants to encounter one another on a deeper and more constructive level. Because of this incident, the book which recounts the research findings is dedicated as follows: *For my children, Courtney and Liam, and for a more just future shared with all of South Africa's children.*

IS FORGIVENESS (IM)POSSIBLE AMONG SOUTH AFRICAN CHRISTIANS?

As was explained earlier, the research process compared understandings of forgiveness before a facilitated intercultural Bible reading process, and after the process. The primary question that can be asked is whether the intercultural Bible reading process (facilitated under the conditions of positive intergroup contact) helps the Black and White Christians to adapt and change their understandings of forgiveness in relation to one another?

The findings of the post intervention research data and analysis shows that to a large extent (except for minor variations) the participants of the intercultural Bible reading intervention developed more integral (shared in-group and out-group) understandings of forgiveness. This means that participants were far more open

to accepting understandings of forgiveness that were not initially held within their in-group but were more common among members of the out-group. For example, members of Group A (the predominantly Black and Coloured group) were willing to aggregate their social and political understandings of forgiveness with individual and spiritual understandings. In other words, while they held that forgiveness has social, political and economic aspects, it was also more than just a transaction. Re-humanisation required some theological and spiritual resources in dealing with their perpetrators. In Group B (the White group), members who had held almost exclusively individual and spiritual understandings of forgiveness, adopted understandings of forgiveness that had social and political implications and consequences. This means that they came to understand the importance of making tangible and sacrificial contributions towards the economic, political and social development of those who suffer under apartheid.

Hence, the data showed that the majority of participants underwent a shift in theological understandings of forgiveness between the pre-intercultural Bible reading engagements and the post-intercultural Bible reading engagements. The “extent” of the shift was significant both in the theological content of how understandings of forgiveness changed and in the number of participants that expressed such hermeneutic shifts (Forster, 2017a:178–189). Moreover, the “theological understanding” of forgiveness among the participants was more integrated for the majority of participants, i.e. the participants expressed theologically shared expressions of forgiveness that included the individual and the collective, the spiritual, and the political. This is in keeping with an AQAL reading of the possibilities of understanding forgiveness in Matthew 18.15–35 (cf. Forster, 2017b).

A second important set of findings in the research relates to the mechanisms of positive inter-group contact that were used among the participants. Allport’s inter-group contact theory suggested that certain types of contact could contribute towards what is called an “optimal contact strategy” in which the prejudice between groups is reduced, and the possibility of social transformation and harmony is increased (Allport, 1954:264; Dixon, Durrheim & Tredoux, 2005:699). Since this was a case study with a limited number of participants and a limited number of inter-group contact sessions, the findings are not conclusive or normative in nature. In other words, they would need to be tested in other settings, with different groups, to see what aspects are valid or invalid among different sets of participants.

In summary, the study showed that more integral (shared) theological understandings of forgiveness were evidenced among the majority participants in this intercultural Bible reading process conducted under the conditions of positive inter-group contact. In this sense, the discovery of one another, and the willingness to engage one another’s perspectives (at least in part) does speak of the possibility of forgiveness that is both gracious, and grounded. The evidence showed shared understandings of forgiveness that sets the other free, but also forgiveness that works for true social, political and economic freedom. Indeed, this is the work of recognising the other as human, and becoming more fully human in one’s self as a result of the encounter.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began with an acknowledgement that forgiveness is a complex and contested issue in South Africa. In particular, the point was made that while it is a necessary and important process for South Africans, our different hermeneutic understandings of what the Bible says about forgiveness, contribute towards our inability to forgive and be forgiven.

Does this mean that forgiveness is impossible?

This study showed that one could give content to, and explicate, the theological perspectives, and the hermeneutic informants, of Black and White readers of the biblical text. This helps the 'problem owner', i.e. the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Helderberg Circuit, to understand what some of the barriers to shared understandings of forgiveness may be. Moreover, it allowed for the design of the intercultural Bible reading intervention under the conditions of positive inter-group contact that facilitated shared and textured understandings of forgiveness among the participants. The participants engaged in a process of theological translation that allowed for the emergence of a shared, and authentic, politics of forgiveness. Nussbaum suggests that such processes of hermeneutic translation remain important for social transformation. She writes:

[T]he ability to imagine the experience of another – a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form – needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains (Nussbaum, 2010:10).

It is suggested that this project facilitated an act of translation, even if only in a modest form, between the two participating communities. So, to answer the previously stated question, "Is forgiveness impossible?" In a modest and limited manner, this study has shown that as far as theological understandings of forgiveness among culturally diverse readers of Matthew 18.15-35 is concerned, the journey toward shared politics of forgiveness may indeed be a possibility.

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